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ABSTRACT

For many small-town citizens the post office remains an essential institution, not only as a collector and distributor of the mails but also as a focal point of sociability and intimacy, as a news center, and as a provider of special neighborhood services and counseling. In order to provide data for the Postal Rate Commission (charged with reviewing appeals from patrons of post offices which the Postal Service has decided to close or consolidate), this research paper reports the sociological implications and community effects resulting from the closing of a post office in a small rural community. Data were derived from interviews with 151 residents in 37 communities in 19 states and in all 5 U.S. Postal Regions. Conclusions focus primarily on the viability of the community whose post office may be closed. If the community shows signs of being a strong one, then the closing of its post office would cause significant, perhaps irreparable, harm. If, however, the community exists in name only, with few people supporting or being served by its post office, the closing of such a facility would have little adverse effect. Twenty-one vital signs, principally tests of the vigor of a community's relationship with its post office, are presented to assist the Postal Service in determining community viability. (NEC)

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At the Crossroads

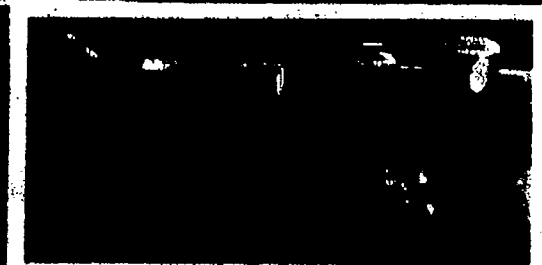
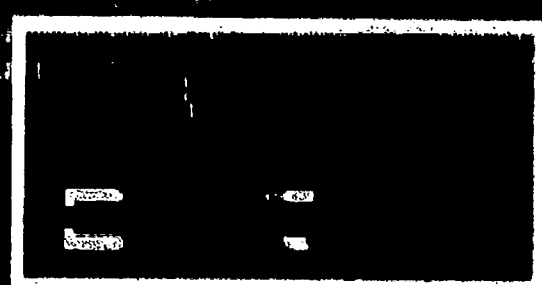
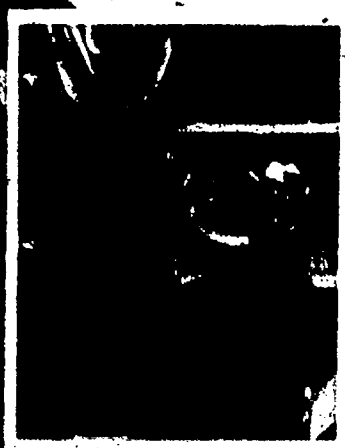
An Inquiry into
Rural Post Offices
and the Communities
They Serve

By Richard J. Margolis

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At the Crossroads

**An Inquiry into Rural Post Offices
and the Communities They Serve**

By Richard J. Margolis

About the Author

Richard J. Margolis is a noted journalist who has written extensively on rural affairs for newspapers, journals, foundations, and government agencies. He is also the founding Chairman of *Rural America, Inc.*, a Washington-based non-profit organization.

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Table of Contents

	PAGE
Foreword	v
Preface	ix
Audience, Approach, Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction	1
What This Paper Is About	1
I. Background	3
Rural America: Decline and Ascent	4
The Post Office: Past as Prologue	6
Recent Legislative History	10
Post-Legislative Update	13
II. Post Offices at the Crossroads	15
Focus of Sociability	15
Communications Center	19
Neighbor and Counselor	20
III. Community	25
Definitions	25
Attitudes	29
Villages: Lost and Found	33
Vital Signs	37
IV. Appendix	39
Summary of General Characteristics: 1970	41
Population of the United States: 1790-1970	42
Number of Rural Places and Percent of the U.S. Population Residing Therein: 1950-1970	43
Components of Population Change for Groups of Metropolitan and Nonmetropolitan Counties: 1960-1970 and 1970-1974	44
Mobility of the U.S. Population: 1965-70 and 1970-75	45
Rural Population by Race: 1970	45
Age Distribution by Place of Residence: 1970	46
Educational Characteristics by Place of Residence: 1970	47
Income in 1969 of Families by Place of Residence	47
Poverty Status in 1969 of Families by Place of Residence	48
Number of Post Offices and Difference from Previous Year: 1895-1975	49

V. A Selected Annotated Bibliography	51
About the Post Office	51
About Rural America ,	52
About Community	53

Foreword

The Postal Rate Commission has initiated a series of research papers designed to bring to public attention issues which affect the Postal Service and the postal community.

At the Crossroads, by Richard J. Margolis, is the first publication of the series. Other papers will be published periodically. Our goal in this series is not to prescribe solutions to important policy questions. Instead, we aim to foster debate and constructive thinking for those responsible for policy decisions in the postal area.

The Postal Rate Commission, established as an independent regulatory agency in 1970 by the Postal Reorganization Act, is responsible for the review and analysis of rates and classification proposals initiated by the Postal Service. In 1976, the Commission was designated by Congress to review appeals from patrons of post offices which the Postal Service has decided to close or consolidate. One basic goal of appeal reviews by the Commission is to determine whether in deciding on a proposed closing or consolidation the Postal Service has adequately weighed the effect of the action on the community in question. The Commission's experience so far under the new law indicates that rural post offices are the likeliest candidates for closing or consolidation. The purpose of this first research paper is to investigate the sociological implications and community effects resulting from the closing of a post office in a small rural community.

Mr. Margolis reviews the history and development of postal delivery and the Postal Service, including an historic review of pertinent Congressional legislation, as it affects rural areas. He then considers the composition of the rural population currently being served by the Postal Service. An exploratory investigation of sample rural communities is undertaken for the purpose of developing a profile of community life. The author concludes with a list of 21 *vital signs* which, taken as indicators, should prove useful in defining the term "community effect."

It should be understood that the views expressed within the study are exclusively those of the author, and that they do not necessarily represent the views of individual Commissioners, Commission staff members, or the Postal Rate Commission as a whole.

A. LEE FRITSCHLER
Chairman
U.S. Postal Rate Commission

Washington, D.C. 20268
Winter, 1980

REBECCA: *I never told you about that letter Jane Crofut got from her minister when she was sick. He wrote Jane a letter and on the envelope the address was like this: It said: Jane Crofut; The Crofut Farm; Grover's Corners; Sutton County; New Hampshire; United States of America.*

GEORGE: *What's funny about that?*

REBECCA: *But listen, it's not finished: the United States of America; Western Hemisphere; the Earth; the Solar System; the Universe; the Mind of God—that's what it said on the envelope.*

—From "Our Town" by Thornton Wilder

Preface

Audience, Approach, Acknowledgments

The audience I envisioned while preparing this essay included a variety of interested parties and disinterested observers: Postal Service officials, congressmen and their staffs, rural and small-town leaders, journalists and commentators, social scientists, historians, students of community life—anyone, in short, whose ideas and energies were likely to contribute to the fashioning of postal policy or to the shaping of rural communities.

The rules I respected were essentially the classic ones subscribed to by writers since before the days of Herodotus: Discover . . . Assess . . . Explain. I traveled widely and interviewed persistently, sometimes by telephone but more often face-to-face. The numbers, for what they are worth, add up to 151 interviews in 37 communities; I talked with citizens in 19 states and in all five U.S. Postal Regions. With rare exceptions, the villages I visited were very small. A majority had populations under 500; only six exceeded 1,000. A few of the communities had lost their post offices, while many others were clearly dreading what one citizen called "our day of reckoning."

The persons I interviewed did not necessarily constitute a cross-section of their towns—and certainly not a scientific sampling of rural America—though I tried to be as wide-ranging as time permitted. My notes, of course, include many interviews with postmasters, as well as with bankers, Realtors, grocers, druggists and other business persons. In addition, I talked with teachers, town officials, attorneys, ministers and recognized community leaders. Finally, I made a special effort to include in my researches those categories of citizens often neglected in such studies: the elderly, the children, the poor and members of ethnic minorities.

Although I was a stranger to nearly everyone I approached, no one refused me an interview and no one appeared to begrudge me his or her time. I am grateful for the friendly welcome I received from rural Americans wherever I went. I can only hope that the results do them justice.

In addition to the traveling and the interviewing, I spent time delving into the relevant literature—and here I had considerable help, first from Philip Margolis, later from Cathy Fleming, a social science scholar on temporary assignment with the Commission. Cathy showed an uncanny talent for unearthing essential facts before I had the wit to know I needed them; and she is largely

responsible for the Annotated Bibliography—the first of this kind—
with which this study concludes.

Thanks are due also to the Postal Rate Commission for making
this paper possible. None of the above, however, should be held
responsible for any errors you may find herein. The buck stops
here.

Richard J. Margolis
Georgetown, Connecticut

Introduction

What This Paper Is About

In the summer of 1976, Congress spelled out for the U.S. Postal Service the procedures that agency ought to follow when deciding whether or not to shut down a local post office. At the top of the list the lawmakers placed a concern they had often expressed in debate but had never before enshrined into public law. In "making a determination to close or consolidate a post office," ran a section of the amendment, the Postal Service should "consider the effect . . . on the community. . . ."

The purpose of this essay is to inquire into the implications of that cryptic but unprecedented entry, one that introduces a novel and potentially weighty element into at least three ongoing scenarios. The most conspicuous of the scenarios relates to our national postal system and to the policies that give it shape and direction; those policies, as we shall see, have for nearly two centuries turned in some measure on an urban-rural axis, at times tipping toward one end, at times toward the other. This latest amendment suggests a turn now in the rural direction.

A second scenario focuses on rural America itself, a sector that has much to gain or lose from Congress's new mandate, depending upon how it is finally interpreted and applied. As we shall observe, the history of rural America intersects with that of the Post Office at several critical points; and the dramatic demographic changes now occurring in rural society may have equally dramatic implications for future Post Office policies.

Still a third scenario—and the one least susceptible to precise description—concerns the fate of *community*, not only as an abstract concept in people's minds but also as a visible fact of life on the American social landscape. Here again, there has been much movement, some of it contradictory. The Congressional amendment will be considered within the framework of a dialectic that accommodates both community decline and community revival.

In what manner do these separate but related strands intertwine? Beyond collection and dissemination of the mails, how does a local post office serve its community? Does it play a broad social role as well as a narrow functional one? A latent role as well as a manifest one? Is it true, as the amendment seems to imply, that the presence of a post office improves a rural community's chances of survival? Conversely, can the closing of a post office hasten a community's demise? What is a community anyway?

These are some of the major questions I shall explore below, sometimes suggesting answers, often raising further questions. In

general, my goal has been less to resolve dilemmas than to clarify them, more to open up discussion than to settle disputes. For if the past is truly prologue, then it seems clear that the questions to be examined here are not likely to go away, and that the time to begin groping for answers is, as always, this very moment.

Section I of the paper—"Background"—is mainly an attempt to sketch in the major routes of history that have brought us to these crossroads. We shall briefly examine the shifting social patterns that have occurred in villages throughout rural America, and we shall note how present patterns may have a direct bearing on postal service and policy. In addition, we shall survey postal history, noting the special esteem in which Americans have always held their Post Office and the unique place the Post Office still enjoys in the rural American psyche. We shall also look at the many oscillations in postal policy that have taken place over the years, especially as they have pertained to rural areas. Finally, Section I will include highlights of the legislative history that led to passage of the Effect-on-Community rule, and of certain events that followed passage.

Section II takes us to the crossroads, where we shall search for social connections between local post offices and their communities. Here we shall reverse Congress's implicit question—concerning the effect on communities of post office closings—and instead investigate the effect on communities of post offices still very much alive. Our attention will be drawn to the special services offered by many rural post offices—services often tailored to the requirements of village demography; we shall also explore the rural post office's unique role as a center of sociability and communications, and as a neighbor and counselor.

Section III takes up the question of community. An attempt will be made to define it—at least for our purposes—and to place it in sociological perspective. Descriptions of "strong" and of "weak" communities will be presented as possible models for assessment by the Postal Service. These will be followed by a guide-list of 21 "vital signs" for use by the Postal Service—signs that can underscore both the viability of a given community and the vigor of that community's social relationship with its local post office.

The paper concludes with an Appendix and an Annotated Bibliography.

I. Background

The Effect-on-Community clause arises from the interplay in Congress of two historic, often conflicting concerns: the one for sound fiscal policy, the other for rural survival. Over the generations these two legitimate public goals have frequently and uneasily shared the legislative stage, and they have done so for the most part in the face of rising postal deficits and declining rural influence. The result has been a series of sporadic efforts by Congress and the Post Office to consolidate or eliminate low revenue-producing rural post offices, and a series of counter-efforts by rural representatives to protect their communities.

In the late 1960s, with the appointment of the President's Commission on Postal Organization, chaired by Frederick R. Kappel, the old dilemma seemed well on its way to an urban solution. Among other things, the Commission recommended that Congress charter a corporation to manage the postal service "on a self-supporting basis," whereby "operating efficiencies and a sound rate structure would over time be expected to eliminate the postal deficit." ("Kappel Commission Report: Towards Postal Excellence," June 1968). Two years later Congress took the Commission's advice, establishing the U.S. Postal Service as a chartered corporation and mandating that it eliminate all operating deficits by 1984. Thus for the first time in its history the Post Office appeared to have been removed from the influence of day-to-day politics and to have been entrusted to the care of corporate-style managers.

The new arrangements struck most rural advocates as a blow to their constituencies' interests, placing business efficiency above public service and therefore endangering the survival of fiscally inefficient village post offices. The scholar Wayne E. Fuller, in his history of *The American Mail* (University of Chicago Press, 1972), tersely expressed these rural misgivings: "And once again, urban America had its way over rural America in its management of the Post Office." Conceding that the 1970 Postal Reorganization Act did contain certain rural safeguards—notably a caveat that "No small post office shall be closed solely for operating at a deficit. . . ."—Fuller nevertheless remained pessimistic. "Rural legislators," he lamented, "who looked not at the promises but at the realities of an independent postal corporation virtually compelled to be self-sustaining by the fateful year of 1984 at least, were not convinced that the rural mail service would not suffer."

In light of recent legislative history, then, the passage of the 1976 amendment with its Effect-on-Community clause seems to represent a positive turnabout in the fortunes of rural Americans vis-a-vis

their post offices. Yet the amendment can also be seen simply as the latest swing of an old and fickle pendulum. In this section we shall look at the larger "legislative history"—the long and complex relationship between rural Americans and their post offices—and then at the chronology of events that led to passage of the Effect-on-Community rule.

Rural America: Decline and Ascent

The two-century-old debate over Post Office policy has occurred against a backdrop of more or less steady rural decline embellished by occasional moments of renewal. In Lincoln's day, only one out of every four Americans lived in a city; in our time, that ratio has been reversed. The long-term deterioration in rural fortunes is part of a larger story, one that encompasses the industrialization of American cities and the mechanization of American farms. These two strong winds have blown everything before them, ceaselessly, driving rural wealth, resources and manpower into the urban maw. Over generations the upshot has been perhaps the largest mass migration in human history. In the 1920s alone, 15 million farm families—more than two-fifths of the nation's entire farm population—were, in the words of President Hoover's Research Committee on Social Trends, "swept cityward."

The rare occasions of revival that rural society has enjoyed during this long period have generally been associated with temporary slowdowns in net rural out-migration, and these moments in turn have frequently gone hand in hand with revived public sympathy for rural concerns. While the parallel is far from perfect, it can be said that Post Office policy has roughly reflected this pendulum pattern, usually swinging toward rural preservation in the wake of changed demographics or of a changed political climate, or both. Thus in the late 1930s, when a "Back-to-the-Land" movement made it appear (mistakenly) that the rural out-tide was finally turning, the Post Office Department began to curtail its closings, shutting down only 2,793 post offices between 1939-49, compared with 5,082 during the previous decade.

Today we are apparently witnessing a similar congruence—a dramatic change for the better in rural demographics followed by a renewed Congressional effort to safeguard small community post offices. The demographic shift has been precisely outlined by Peter A. Morrison and Judith P. Wheeler in a recent *Population Bulletin* issued by the Population Reference Bureau in Washington, D.C. (Vol. 31, No. 3). The title poses an interesting question—"Rural Renaissance in America?"—which the writers proceed to answer: "For the first time in this century, and probably in the nation's

history, more Americans are moving away from metropolitan areas than are moving to them, in an abrupt and baffling reversal of the long established trend to urbanization."

Some of the facts cited by Morrison and Wheeler are compelling:

- Each year between 1970 and 1975, for every 100 people who moved to the metropolitan sector, 131 moved out.

- During this period three-fourths of all non-metropolitan communities registered population gains. Moreover, those gains occurred in nearly two-thirds of all rural counties. During the 1960s only one-fourth of all rural counties had enjoyed population growth; and in the 1950s such gains were limited to but one-tenth of all rural counties.

- "Even non-metropolitan areas that are far distant from urban and metropolitan influence—the kinds of places that used to be regarded as 'nowhere' in the 1950s—have been registering net migration gains instead of their once perennial losses."

As the authors of this study make clear, it is much too early to tell whether the statistics represent an authentic rural sunrise or merely a false dawn. In any event, they bear watching by the Postal Service, for as rural communities continue to gain, the Effect-on-Community rule is likely to gain with them, looming ever larger in the minds of rural citizens and their allies.

Meanwhile, the present rural population remains markedly different in status and condition from its urban and suburban counterparts. In 1967 President Lyndon Johnson's Commission on Rural Poverty characterized rural Americans as "The People Left Behind," noting that "Rural poverty is so widespread, and so acute, as to be a national disgrace. . . ." Today, despite those go-ahead population figures, many rural Americans remain "left behind." For example:

- Rural Americans are still disproportionately poor. While comprising 26 percent of the total population, they make up 34 percent of those Americans whose incomes are below the official Federal "poverty line." Put another way, the prevalence of poverty in non-metropolitan areas is one-third higher than in metropolitan areas.

- Rural Americans are still disproportionately under-educated. Among the nation's functionally illiterate, 42 percent live in rural areas. Nearly half of all rural Americans over age 24 lack a high school diploma, compared with one-third in urban areas.

- Rural Americans are still disproportionately aged. To quote the *Fact Book on Aging*, published in 1979 by the National Council on the Aging, Inc.: "The highest concentration of old people is found in small towns. . . . The high proportion of older persons in rural small towns would seem to be primarily attributable to the high rate of outmigration of young persons and the trend of older farmers to migrate to the nearest small community when they can no longer operate their farms. . . ."

Such figures underscore the continuing disadvantage that rural communities suffer in the larger competition for wealth, goods and services. More pertinent here, the numbers suggest the possibility of a special relationship between small-town residents and their post offices, one based in part on the needs of the poor, the illiterate and the elderly. In Section II we shall discover whether, in fact, such a relationship has developed in rural communities.

(An Appendix is included to provide a greater depth of statistical information on Rural America and its post offices. An annotated bibliography on relevant rural sociological literature is also attached.)

The Post Office: Past as Prologue

From the beginning, the U.S. Post Office has belonged to the people—or so the people have insisted. The American citizen by and large has viewed postal service not as an occasional luxury but as a daily necessity, a right rather than a privilege. If he has sometimes cursed the Post Office for presumed lapses in diligence, he has at other times praised it beyond measure for the myriad blessings it has brought. Charles William Eliot's extravagant paean—carved into the stone of the old Post Office Building in Washington—to some extent still reflects the public's sense of wonder and affection:

Carrier of news and knowledge
Instrument of trade and commerce
Promoter of mutual acquaintance
Among men and nations and hence
Of peace and good will.

Carrier of love and sympathy
Messenger of friendship
Consoler of the lonely
Servant of the scattered family
Enlarger of the public life.

It was chiefly the Post Office that held rural Americans within the national framework. The mail bound farm to city and connected the ever-receding West to the established, populous East. Emerson lauded the mail as "a fine metre of civilization," an instrument that shed light on a murky wilderness. Writing in 1879, a former Washington postal official named D. D. T. Leech observed with some justification that "No one of the Executive Departments ministers so effectively to the every-day wants of the people as the General Post Office. . . . Its influence in promoting the civilization of new settlements is only surpassed by that of the pulpit, the schoolhouse, and the press, whose issues it circulates."

Even Tocqueville, that astute traveler of early American roads, expressed amazement over the postal system's swift expansion to the West. "In Michigan forests," he marvelled, "there is not a cabin so isolated; not a valley so wild, that it does not receive letters and newspapers at least once a week; we saw it ourselves." Elsewhere he noted that "The post, that great link between minds, now penetrates into the heart of the wilderness. . . ."

No rural settlement back then was so small or so raw that its residents did not feel entitled to demand postal service. And because many of the new maps of America were really postal maps—drawn, as often as not, on the basis of contemporary mail routes and stations—it was literally true that no new community could claim to be "on the map" until it could first claim to have a post office. Postal service and civic pride thus became inextricably and perhaps permanently linked in the rural American mind—which may be why nowadays many villages have water towers that display not only the town's name but also its ZIP Code.

For the most part, Congress was cheerfully prepared to accede to Western demands for mail service. Very early—in the 1820s—the lawmakers laid down the odd but important principle that Congress and *only* Congress could decide where and when post roads would be established; the rule would deprive future postmasters general of considerable discretionary power, the sort of administrative authority that other cabinet heads would routinely enjoy and take for granted.

What this meant, according to the historian Wayne E. Fuller, was "that the American people, both collectively and in special interest groups, would more than any other single factor shape the American mail system." Moreover, "they would make constant demands upon the Post Office Department," and those demands "would bring post roads to town, village, and country across the land, establish post offices in cities and crossroad country stores, help eventually to determine postal rates, and force the postmaster general to

improvise, innovate, and reorganize the service from time to time . . . all to keep abreast of the people's requests."

Thanks to "the people's requests," mail routes and post offices proliferated—and so did postal deficits. When the War of 1812 began, the nation had 2,610 post offices and about 39,000 miles of post roads. By 1820, the year of the first postal deficit, the totals had nearly doubled. With rare lapses, in deficit years as well as in surplus years, this expansionist trend continued throughout the Nineteenth Century, with the numbers soaring evermore steeply as the century wore on. Between 1870 and 1890, for example, the nation's post offices increased from about 28,000 to 62,000, and a peak of 77,000 was reached in 1901. From that point on the totals have been in consistent decline. Today the nation is served by some 30,000 post offices, of which about 6,000 were called "fourth class" and another 12,000 "third class" before 1974, when the Postal Service changed its nomenclature. Most of these 18,000 post offices are located in rural communities.

That first postal deficit back in 1820 was also the occasion in Congress for the first protracted debate between rural and urban interests over postal policy. The debate set a pattern that in one guise or another was to be repeated again and again, right up to the present. At that juncture in history, the representatives from cities, where postal service was already well established, evinced a stronger concern for fiscal prudence than for postal growth, while the rural legislators seemed more willing to risk Post Office deficits in exchange for extension of service to the provinces. The upshot was a characteristic stalemate: Congress gave the Postmaster General the power to discontinue nonpaying post routes; but as Fuller noted, the concession "was so hedged about with qualifications that it was difficult to eliminate a route over which almost no mail was carried in an entire year!"

Such compromises were to become a regular feature in the making of postal policy, as Congress kept trying to accomplish everything at once—to balance the budget, expand the service and reconcile rural needs with urban demands. It did not help matters that either of the two interest groups was capable of instantly reversing philosophies—from fiscal prudence, for instance, to service development—if the political situation seemed to warrant it. A debate that occurred in 1851 was a case in point. City-based legislators wanted lower postage rates imposed wherever Post Office revenues showed a surplus—that is, in the big cities. Rural lawmakers, meanwhile, knew that the Post Office used urban-generated income to subsidize low-revenue mail routes in the rural South and West. The situation called for philosophical flip-flops by

both sides: now the rural interests preached fiscal prudence while the urban minions pressed, in effect, for reduced revenues.

Once again Congress "solved" the dilemma by attempting to satisfy everyone. It reduced postage rates and at the same time guaranteed to preserve rural post offices. The guarantee came in the form of an amendment, to wit:

That no post office now in existence shall be discontinued, nor shall the mail service on any mail routes in any of the States or Territories be discontinued or diminished in consequence of any diminution of the revenues that may result from this act; and it shall be the duty of the Postmaster General to establish new post offices and place the mail service on any new routes established, in the same manner as though this act had not passed.

In other words, rural Americans were not supposed to suffer the consequences of Post Office budget reductions.

It is a rule of politics that when everyone gains temporarily, nothing is solved permanently. The dilemma that Congress neatly evaded in 1851 did not go away; it rematerialized to haunt each subsequent generation, including our own. Perhaps the most dramatic of those moments came at the turn-of-the-century when the nation's farmers defeated an urban campaign for one-cent postage and compelled Congress instead to appropriate large sums of money for Rural Free Delivery. The establishment of R.F.D. was viewed as a victory for rural Americans, yet it turned out to be a mixed blessing. While the new routes brought mail service to millions of previously isolated and unserved families, it also rendered a large number of village post offices obsolete, the farmers preferring to have their mail delivered than to pick it up at the post office. As C. E. Lively has pointed out in his contribution to *Change in Rural America* (C. V. Mosby, 1978), "The development of the rural free delivery resulted in the disappearance of numerous country post offices. This was followed by the disappearance of many country stores, many of which constituted the sole business establishment in a small trade center." In all, some 25,000 fourth-class post offices shut down between 1901 and 1920; and, as Fuller observes, "many a little community, having lost its identity when it lost its post office, disappeared from the face of the land."

Note that Fuller routinely associates the fate of rural communities with that of their post offices. In this he has ample precedent, for if the connection has never been analyzed, it has long been recognized. "The post offices of the country are the hard centers of the community," wrote a political commentator in the 1880s. During that same period Sen. Joseph Hawley of Connecticut inveighed

against a proposal to consolidate small post offices because, as he put it, "It is against feeling, the old-fashioned feeling of what the post office ought to be." In those days, writes Fuller, Congress opposed consolidation of rural post offices because they wanted to preserve an "intimate relationship between patrons and postmasters in a world rapidly becoming urbanized, centralized, and impersonalized. . . ." As we shall see, very little has changed since then. As recently as 1976 congressmen were making eloquent speeches that equated post offices with community strength. The comments of Senator Jennings Randolph seemed to echo those of earlier days: "These postmasters—men and women—are, in a sense, counselors to so many people. They help in many ways with the filling out of forms and reports, and they represent the human side of Government."

Such expressions of rural sentiment in Congress doubtless hastened passage of the Effect-on-Community clause of the 1976 amendment.

Recent Legislative History

The following is a chronology of major events leading up to passage of the Effect-on-Community amendment.

1964—The General Accounting Office (GAO) recommends the closing of more rural post offices in order to save money.

1967—The GAO repeats its recommendation.

1969—In a letter to the National Association of Postmasters of the United States Postmaster General Winton Blount appears to reject the GAO philosophy. "It has become obvious to me in the last few months," he writes, "that there are no really significant cost savings to be realized by closing small post offices. Our major problem is to improve our operations in the big cities; the real opportunities for cost savings exist there."

1970—Congress passes the Postal Reorganization Act, dissolving the Post Office Department and replacing it with the U.S. Postal Service, a quasi-public agency meant to be managed on business principles. Among other things, the new Postal Service is mandated "to be self-sustaining by 1984." At the same time it is instructed to "provide a maximum degree of effective postal service to rural areas, communities, and small towns where post offices are not self-sustaining. *No small post office shall be closed solely for operating at a deficit. . . .*" (italics added) In part to defray rural postal expenses and in part to finance other low-revenue postal services, Congress commits itself over the next ten years to annual public subsidies of \$920,000,000 after which the yearly appropriation is to be reduced, over a period of years, by half.

1973—The Postal Service issues rules regarding the closing of small post offices:

The outright discontinuance of a post office will be considered when (a) a community has been abandoned, or (b) a vacancy exists in the position of postmaster, or (c) service to be provided will be as good as, or better than; the service being received, and one or more of the following conditions exist:

(1) No suitable person can be found in the community to permanently take charge of the post office.

(2) No suitable quarters can be found in the community for housing the post office.

(3) Fewer than 25 families are being served by the post office.

(4) Another post office or a classified station or branch is located within a reasonable distance of the post office to be discontinued (normally 3 to 5 miles except in sparsely settled areas such as Alaska), which is easily accessible to the customers affected, and will provide services equal to, or better than, the services being received.

June 4, 1975—A GAO report to Congress is published by the U.S. Comptroller General. The cover legend tells the story: "\$100 Million Could Be Saved Annually in Postal Operations In Rural America Without Affecting The Quality of Service." The report calls for the closing of 12,000 small post offices, including all fourth-class stations and about half the third-class post offices. In making the case for closings, the Comptroller General cites the 1974 postal deficit of \$2.3 billion, noting at the same time that Congress has given the U.S. Postal Service "the independence necessary to operate as a business entity rather than as an ordinary executive department. . . ." The report also cites a survey that the GAO conducted in 32 rural communities where post offices were recently closed. According to the GAO, 91 percent of the residents in those communities felt their postal service was as good as or better than it had been before the closings.

September 23-24 and October 8, 1975—Two subcommittees of the House Committee on Post Office and Civil Service hold joint hearings on "GAO's Recommendation that 12,000 Small Post Offices Be Closed." Most of the testimony opposes the recommendation. A GAO spokesperson concedes that the report may have been too "severe," and notes that if they had to write it again "it would be different."

November 1975—Undeterred by the hearings, the Postal Service issues new guidelines for the closing of small post offices. (Note especially Rule #4, a catch-all clause.)

A Sectional Center Manager may determine to discontinue a post office, whether or not it is operating at a deficit, if one or more of the following conditions exist:

1. An equivalent or improved level of postal service can be provided to the affected customers more efficiently by the city, rural, or star route carrier.
2. Another post office, community post office, classified or contract station or branch is located within a reasonable distance of the post office to be discontinued, is easily accessible to the customers affected and would provide an equivalent or improved level of postal service.
3. A survey of the customers affected discloses that a majority of them approve a change to city, rural, or star route delivery.
4. Changing conditions related to the community, or to the staffing of facilities of the post office, make it impractical to operate a post office.

December 3 and 5, 1975—The House Subcommittee on Postal Facilities; Mail; and Labor Management reacts to the new regulations by holding more hearings. Again, much of the testimony is markedly pro-rural and hostile to the new criteria for small post office closings.

March 1976—U.S. District Court Judge John L. Smith calls a halt to the planned closings of 600 post offices. Acting in a suit filed by Congressman Paul Simon, 40 other representatives and three senators, Judge Smith rules that the Postal Service must conduct a survey in each of the affected communities and must give the residents at least 90 days' notice of closing.

June 1976—Congress spells out new procedures to govern the closing of small post offices, including the Effect-on-Community rule.

The Postal Service, in making a determination whether or not to close or consolidate a post office, shall consider—

- (A) the effect of such closing or consolidation on the community served by such post office;
- (B) the effect of such closing or consolidation on employees of the Postal Service employed at such office;
- (C) whether such closing or consolidation is consistent with the policy of the Government . . . that the Postal Service shall

provide a maximum degree of effective and regular postal services to rural areas, communities, and small towns where post offices are not self-sustaining;

(D) the economic savings to the Postal Service resulting from such closing or consolidation; and

(E) such other factors as the Postal Service determines are necessary.

September, 1976—At the same time, Congress makes it possible for towns to appeal closing decisions by the Postal Service, naming the Postal Rate Commission as reviewer of any such appeals.

Post-Legislative Update

June 1976—The Postal Service places a moratorium on all post office closings.

December 1977—The moratorium is lifted.

June 1978 thru September 1979—The Postal Service moves to close 90 post offices, 33 of which are actually shut down. Twenty-four threatened post offices appeal to the Postal Rate Commission, and in all of those cases the Commission instructs the Postal Service to reconsider, taking into account the effect of closings on the communities. The Commission does not list all the effects the Postal Service must consider, but in a concurring opinion Commission Vice-Chairman Simeon Bright outlines four pages of questions he feels the Postal Service might ask before closing a post office.

From the above chronologies it is readily seen that history can be both circular and linear. On the one hand, much of what has occurred over the past fifteen years seems a remarkably faithful reprise of familiar Nineteenth Century story-lines: the rising postal deficits, the clash of fiscal concerns with rural interests and, most important, the intermittent care taken by Congress to preserve the rural post office against mounting pressures to the contrary.

On the other hand, the passage in 1976 of the Effect-on-Community rule suggests that history does not always repeat itself and that, in fact, the 150-year-old debate has taken a sharp turn. For the amendment now compels postal officials to confront an entirely new set of questions, namely those pertaining to the multiple *social connections* that may link rural post offices to the communities they serve.

What follows here—in an effort to clear the way for future investigation by the Postal Service—is an initial inquiry into those social connections.

II. Post Offices at the Crossroads

It will probably come as no surprise to the Postal Service to learn that during my investigations I found not a single rural citizen who seemed prepared to give up his local post office without a murmur. As we have seen, the marriage between Americans and their post offices has endured much too long, and has been far too successful, to permit anything but a painful separation.

My purpose, however, was not to assess rural people's postal affections, though these were abundantly evident; my purpose was to identify the ways, if any, that small-town post offices nurtured and sustained their communities, not as formal distributors of the mail but as informal ministrants to the citizenry. The search for social connections between town and post office took me down several paths and raised many questions, some of which centered on the mystery of community: When can a collection of people be said to be a community, and how does one gauge that community's relative viability (or mortality)? Such riddles will be explored in due course. For the present, we shall confine ourselves to an examination of the positive social and psychological relationships that often prevail between rural post offices and the residents they serve. In particular, we shall look at three separate but related roles frequently played by the rural post office: as a focal point of sociability and intimacy; as a communications center; and as a neighbor and counselor.

In nearly all instances the data cited below should be construed as examples meant to illuminate more general social patterns, patterns that appeared to hold true in a large majority of the communities I visited. In the few cases where events or statements proved exceptions to the rule rather than the rule itself, such contradictions are clearly indicated in the text.

Focus of Sociability

A nostalgic and sentimental version of the typical rural post office pictures the male citizens sitting in rocking chairs around a pot-belly stove, swapping tall tales. The old postmaster shuffles faithfully from stove to stamps to staples, for this is a general store as well as a post office, and the postmaster is also the village storekeeper. A postmaster in Ivel, Kentucky, recently reminisced about such post offices: "Those fellows in their rockers, they'd spit that old tobacco juice on the red hot stove and it'd crack like a '22'."

In my travels I saw many rural post offices that doubled as general stores, and some still had pot-belly stoves. But the stoves

were mainly for show and sentiment; they were rarely lit and still more rarely surrounded by lounging villagers. John H. Spurlock, who for more than thirty years has been the postmaster-storekeeper in Printer, Kentucky, put it this way: "I still got the stove, but I ain't got the people. People today are always in a rush—they don't take the time to socialize like they used to."

But if the pace of modern rural life has shoved aside the pot-belly stove, it has nonetheless continued to make room for the post office as a stoker of social interchange. The physical signs inside these post offices—signs of easy, day-to-day intimacy—are unmistakable: the freshcut flowers in the tiny lobby; the amateurish photograph tacked on a bulletin board—of a neighbor fisherman, for instance, holding his prize catch; the simmering pot of coffee and the paper cups stacked by the percolator—these and other such homely touches combine in many small post offices to generate an air of *gemütlichkeit* that is absent from most larger stations.

Despite the inroads made by rural free delivery, many small-town residents still prefer to rent boxes at their post office. It is a choice of intentional inconvenience, which is to say they would rather be sociable (taking daily trips to the post office) than lonely (awaiting delivery of mail at the house). As nearly everyone I interviewed kept telling me, the post office is a good place to meet one's friends and neighbors. Here, for example, are some of the comments residents of Lemont, Pennsylvania, made about their post office:

It's a community center for all ages.

The post office isn't just for some people; it's for all of us.

A place where I can say hello.

The only public building we use daily.

Just seeing the same people every day is reassuring. It makes me feel better.

The daily ritual of walking to the post office, of visiting there with neighbors, of being recognized and called by name—all of this seems part of a comforting ceremony and an important item on the villager's social agenda. In Lemont recently, some interested citizens spent several days sitting by a window in a restaurant across the street from the post office on Pike Street, tabulating the comings and goings of their fellow residents. They discovered that people stayed in the building a long time, much longer than their postal business would have seemed to require. And on the sidewalk in front, as one observer noted, "little knots of people kept forming, even in the coldest weather. Everyone stopped to chat."

In rural communities familiarity does not appear to breed contempt. Rather, it breeds social intimacy, along with an apparent need for more of the same. We have the remarkable testimony of Della Wilson, the former switchboard operator in New Burlington, Ohio, whose familiar voice, when the telephone company in that village changed over to a dial system, was no longer needed by the corporation. As she relates the story to John Baskin in his book on *New Burlington* (Norton, 1976):

When we made the changeover . . . we had a little ceremony at 2 a.m. The cutover was made after everyone was asleep. So we cut the wire and it looked it was gasping for air. Alice Haines said, "It's so sad." She drove all the way home, then she turned around and came back. I was packing. "Della! Della!" she said. "We won't have you anymore. . . ."

I made a tape for the dial system which announced wrong numbers. People found out they could dial a wrong number and get my voice. Jane Collett used to do it, and Opal Jasper said she did it when she got lonely. [The recording] lasted a month and wore out. The human voice they had known, you see. . . .

Many a rural postmaster has noticed the residents' penchant for casual ritual and repetition—an affection for the familiar. "The same people come in here every day at seven in the morning," Postmaster Bill Nixon, of Claremont, Minnesota, told me. "They know I'm not going to be done sorting their mail till maybe eight or nine, but there they are, standing around talking to each other. I think people get into pleasant habits—especially the older folks. Coming to the post office may be their one chance all day to get out of the house and see what's happening."

Nixon was hardly alone in his comments about the elderly. Most of the rural postmasters I spoke with understood very well the social uses that older persons often make of the post office. A few of their observations:

Don Wilson, Postmaster in Colo, Iowa: "The older ones, they never seem to want to leave."

Gwendolyn Burns, Postmaster in Lucan, Minnesota: "The old folks like to come and wait for their mail. They visit as they wait. It's a few moments of the day well spent."

E. Louise Luft, Postmaster in Sutter, Illinois: "I think quite a few old people depend on us—if not for service then for company."

Shirley G. Vining, Postmaster in Hamilton Dome, Wyoming: "We have one 84-year-old lady who walks the little distance here from her home every morning. It takes her a long time—she's kind of feeble—but she always gets here. I think it's the high point of her day."

We need not be surprised that many of the rural elderly are relying on local post offices for one kind of social sustenance. A perusal of social science literature on the aged—especially on the rural aged—suggests that the geographically convenient post office, by assuring daily but informal social encounters, precisely suits the special needs of small-town elderly people. In *Older Rural Americans: A Sociological Perspective* (University of Kentucky Press, 1967), E. Grand Youmans explains those special needs:

Informal social participation is an important form of interaction among rural people of all ages. Among older persons it assumes added significance both because they have more free time at their disposal and because so many other avenues of social expression are closed or appear to be closed to them. Visiting with friends enables an older person to share pleasant memories, to keep alive his current interests, and to reinforce his position as a member of the community. . . .

Youmans cites several studies to demonstrate a tendency among the rural elderly to substitute informal social occasions for formal ones, and notes that while "The conditions under which informal visiting takes place have not been the subject of investigation," the studies do make reference to "home visits, backyard conversations, telephone calls, meetings at the store or post office, visits at weddings, funerals, auctions and to many other occasions."

In *Aging in Contemporary Society* (Sage Contemporary Issues, No. 6), Irving Rosow makes a similar point:

. . . The aged live in a contracting social world in which their participation declines With their loss of social roles and group memberships, the social participation is diverted from formal to informal arenas and reduced from more to fewer associates. The associations that they do have are centered on informal groups: family and relatives, friends and neighbors.

Thus in villages throughout the country local post offices may be among the few types of institutions that afford the elderly a chance for daily social nourishment, the kind of life-sustaining support that only a community can provide. (We shall return to the elderly when we take up the post office's role as neighbor and counselor.)

Communications Center

The village post office is a medium for a variety of messages, from political news to local gossip. It is the place where residents are likely to learn of the comings and goings of their neighbors, of births and deaths, weddings and reunions, travels and returns. Other institutions in town—notably churches, schools and civic clubs—may also from time to time transmit important information to the townspeople; but because of its central location and its daily use by residents, the post office looms as the village's most reliable purveyor of news. In recent decades, moreover, with the disappearance of thousands of rural weekly newspapers, the post office's role as communications center has expanded.

Some of the communications are literally on display. Every rural post office has at least two bulletin boards or display areas, one carrying official Post Office business—"Most Wanted" posters, new postal regulations and the like—the other reflecting strictly local interests. These can range from announcements of coming events to "help wanted" advertisements.

The display area I viewed in the post office at Brooklin, Maine, seemed typical of many. It featured:

- an anti-pollution notice promulgated by the town's Board of Selectmen;
- a pink leaflet announcing "swim lessons" at the YMCA;
- an announcement that the "Hancock County Conservation District can help you with your soil and water problems . . .";
- a placard advertising the date of a nursery school rummage and bake sale;
- a small card soliciting baby-sitting assignments and bearing the question, "Are the kids on your nerves?";
- a leaflet giving the commercial location of "The best fishing in New England"; and
- a printed photograph of some smiling young musicians, with the caption: "Six students proclaim Christian truth thru vocal and instrumental music."

Admittedly, much of the information found on post office bulletin boards is marginal; that is, most residents could easily get through the day without it. Such, however, is not the case with certain other types of news regularly transmitted via post offices, news exchanged among the residents themselves or passed along by the postmaster from one customer to the next. Clay Carmody, the mayor of Colo, Iowa, recalled for me the information he had gathered that morning while spending five minutes at the post of-

face: "Where the fish are biting How the crops are doing My friend Joe's going to have x-rays tomorrow Al's in Chicago visiting his sister; that's why he wasn't at the meeting yesterday; there was a fire last night in the Krebs' backyard; I didn't even hear the sirens. . . . There's talk of a tornado warning later tonight. . . ."

The crop and weather news Carmody heard that day was vital to the community's social and economic welfare. No less so was some of the other news. For instance, people in that part of Iowa fish not just for pleasure but also for dinner. To know where the fish are biting is to know that your family will be fed that day. Similarly, the news of Joe's x-rays alerted Carmody and other Colo residents to the possibility of serious illness, during which Joe's family might require assistance.

Sometimes the emergency is more pressing. At the Milroy, Minnesota, post office one morning much of the conversation centered on a grisly post-wedding highway accident in which the bridegroom was killed and the bride seriously injured. The talk ran to funeral preparations and to the various ways that villagers were helping the two stricken families. Informally but effectively, people took on assignments: the cooking of meals, the notifying of relatives, etc.

In such ways do citizens transact their business and meet their mutual needs.

Neighbor and Counselor

The little red post office in a Pennsylvania village houses 364 P.O. boxes, and all but one is rented. Box No. 364, in the righthand bottom corner, has had a broken lock all year; instead of fixing it, the postmaster decided to turn it into a "Children's Box." He keeps it filled nowadays with advertising mail, so when a child comes to inquire, "Any mail for me today?" the postmaster can say, "You better take a look." Many Lemont children come to inquire.

"Did I get anything today, Mister?"

"Think so; take a look."

The Children's Box may be unique, but it reflects a quality common to many rural post offices: a readiness to go an extra mile for the residents. The Pennsylvania postmaster's altruistic philosophy—"If there's anything I can do to be helpful, I'll do it"—is widely shared by his rural colleagues. The result is that small-town citizens often benefit from a variety of special services beyond the usual call of postal duty. What follows is a listing of the more common of those services, along with some thoughts on who benefits from

which services. However, since many of the favors fall outside the scope of Post Office regulations, the names of towns and postmasters will be largely omitted.

Services to the Elderly—Older rural citizens whose eyes may be too dim to read small print often ask postal workers to read aloud contracts and other documents. In some cases, the postal worker not only explains the document in hand, he or she helps the resident to write a suitable response.

The elderly are regularly helped with package-wrapping and envelope-stuffing—especially with window envelopes, a contrivance often troublesome to people with weak eyes and arthritic fingers.

Whenever possible, Social Security checks are sorted in advance of the day of distribution, so that recipients can get their checks first thing in the morning, before the rest of the day's mail is distributed.

In some rural post offices, arrangements with the local bank make it possible for a postmaster to sign checks on behalf of citizens too feeble to sign for themselves.

Postmasters keep an eye on their daily elderly customers. When one fails to show up, the postmaster may telephone, or else dispatch someone to the missing person's house.

Services to the Poor and Uneducated—No less than the rural elderly, the small-town poor and semi-literate frequently rely on local postal workers for special assistance. In a letter to Congress written in 1975, Postmaster Albert Hembree of Trosper, Kentucky, described his role:

There are many people here who cannot read or write, or cannot write intelligibly either because of age or physical or mental handicaps. Almost daily, in my free time on duty and off, I help my customers with a lot of their personal problems, ranging from filling out papers to helping them understand the contents of a letter. This is something that never shows up on the statistical charts in Washington, D.C., but to the people in small communities throughout this nation the small-town postmaster provides a service that is indispensable to millions of Americans.

A black community leader interviewed in Hainesville, Alabama, noted that "The postmaster helps with the writing and signing of checks and other papers because of the high rate of illiteracy around here." The same black leader spoke of the trust rural black people place in their local post office: "It's like a family to everyone." The comment suggests that conditions in the black rural South described by sociologist Arthur F. Raper in 1936 (*Preface to Peasantry*, University of North Carolina Press) may still hold true today. Raper

wrote: "Even though the post office is sometimes referred to by Negroes as 'the white folks' post office,' they demonstrate that they trust it more than any other institution serving both races in the Black Belt community. They often buy money orders for mail order houses; they send and receive letters containing discussions which would not be tolerated if known by the local white community. Their confidence is seldom violated. The United States Post Office is practically immune to the dominant local white assumption that the Negro's rights are nowhere outside the reach and control of white public opinion."

In poor rural communities the post office is frequently used as a food stamp depot; and although letter carriers may deliver the stamps to eligible recipients, many residents prefer to pick them up at the post office, fearing misdeliveries.

Some postmasters go to bat for poor citizens in disputes with mail order houses or with other putative creditors.

In farm communities served by migrant workers, postal officials are frequently called upon to help farmworkers fill out money orders being sent back home. Two postmasters I talked with—in Minnesota and in Colorado—were taking night-school courses in Spanish, the better to serve their migrant Chicano clients.

Service to Local Institutions—School-sponsored tours of the post office are commonplace in many villages.

Postmasters invariably act as expert-consultants to churches and civic groups whenever such groups are planning town-wide mailings.

Post offices frequently serve as extensions of town or state government. In Wyoming, for instance, some rural post offices sell fishing and hunting licenses; in Maine, clamming permits. "You might say," observed a Maine postmaster, "that we're an important part of municipal government."

Service to Everyone—From my interviews with rural citizens I learned that village postmasters often go out of their way to please the residents. Among the extra courtesies shown, these were the most frequently mentioned:

- postmasters come to work early, curtail their lunchtime, work past closing hour and even return some nights and weekends—whenever a citizen needs extra assistance.
- people going out of town commonly leave their house keys with the postmaster.
- a traveler starting out can usually leave a complicated itinerary with his rural postmaster and be assured his mail will be faithfully forwarded to him at each stopping-place.

- the post office is often an informal message center. Residents leave notes with the postmaster for friends to retrieve later in the day.

- a stranger in town looking for a certain resident invariably inquires at the post office.

- for the benefit of village philatelists, some postmasters drive many miles to larger post offices, returning with an assortment of collectible stamps.

- similarly, many postmasters travel to larger cities in order to make a wider selection of tax forms available to villagers.

From all of the foregoing, it seems fair to conclude that for many small-town citizens the post office remains an essential institution, not only as a collector and distributor of the mails but also as a meeting place, a news center and a provider of special services—services commonly required by rural residents. These benefits are largely taken for granted and therefore invisible to small-town people as they conduct their daily business. Only when the post office's survival is threatened, or when some outlander like myself comes along with a list of questions, do villagers consciously consider the value of their post office. When that happens, they begin to grope for answers and for ways of making outsiders understand the depth of their postal loyalties. As often as not, they resort to similes. "I guess the post office is like drinking water," I was told by Irma Dicer, a Town Hall clerk in Milroy, Minnesota. "You don't appreciate it till you don't have it."

In a letter to Congressman Charles H. Wilson, Helen W. Sparks of Indianhead, Pennsylvania, hit upon a different analogy: "Did you ever enjoy a great meal at a restaurant with a smiling waitress who keeps your coffee or teacup filled . . . ? By the same token you have no doubt experienced the other extreme. . . . I feel this is going to be the case of my community and the others if third- and fourth-class post offices are closed. They will no doubt get the product, but never the service or the caring atmosphere of another human being. . . ."

Meals? Water? The analogies rural citizens choose nearly always carry overtones of sustenance. One guesses that Senator Ernest F. Hollings came very close to the mark when he characterized a village post office as a "central gathering point. . . . that jells [people] together into a community."

Yet in considering the "effect on community" of closing a post office, the Postal Service needs to know more. It needs to know whether a community in question actually exists, and if so, whether it is weak or strong, declining or growing, moribund or viable. Only

a clear understanding of community—its dimensions and its dynamics—will bring meaning to the amendment. We turn now to these perplexing questions.

III. Community

This section is an attempt to provide a framework for future small-community assessments by the Postal Service. It begins by our looking at some accepted definitions of community and by our asking which definitions seem germane to the questions raised by the Effect-on-Community rule. Next we shall explore changing American attitudes towards small communities, focusing mainly on the social scientists and their many community studies. From there we shall proceed to descriptions of several selected villages, trying to gauge their strengths and weaknesses as communities, and also trying to extract from the evidence some "vital signs" that the Postal Service might bear in mind when it considers the effect on communities of post office closings.

Definitions

Everyone agrees that small communities, or villages, are an ancient human invention and probably a fundamental unit of social organization. As William J. Gore notes in *Change in the Small Community* (Friendship Press, 1967), "The small community holds a dramatic place in the history of man's attempt to order and stabilize his affairs through the creation of civilization." In the view of the anthropologist Robert Redfield, "The small community has been the very predominant form of human living throughout the history of mankind" (*Little Community*, Uppsala University, 1955).

Beyond such axioms, however, students of the small community have tended in their pursuits to ride off in all directions—or so they keep telling us. In their anthology of *Community Studies* (Praeger, 1972), Colin Bell and Howard Newby point out that "over ninety definitions of community have been analyzed and that the one common element in them all was man!" Bell and Newby make much of the fact that "sociologists . . . have not always been immune to the emotive overtones that the word community consistently carries with it," and thus often define the term in light of what they think it *should* mean rather than in consideration of what it does mean.

Nonetheless, even those two skeptics concede that most modern definitions of community are similar in at least two important respects: "When sociologists now talk about community, they almost always mean *a place* in which people have some, if not complete, *solidary relations*" (italics added). In other words, community implies a shared geographical location as well as a set of common interests, goals and responsibilities. The more widely ac-

cepted definitions, though frequently marred by jargon, appear to confirm Bell's and Newby's perception. For example:

A community is "a collectivity of actors sharing in a limited territorial area as the base for carrying out the greatest share of their daily activities."

Gideon Sjoberg

A community makes up "that aspect of the structure of social systems which is referable to the territorial location of persons . . . and their activities."

Talcott Parsons

A community "is that combination of social units and systems that perform the major functions having locality reference; . . . the organization of social activities to afford people daily local access to those broad areas of activity that are necessary in day-to-day living."

Roland L. Warren

"Community . . . refers to the population of a particular area which is inter-related through a set of institutions which provide most of the goods and services required on a day-to-day basis. The community is identified by the existence of a population agglomeration, usually with some form of local government. Its boundaries are indistinct, however, as the community includes not only a central, densely settled region, but also the hinterland served by the center"

Donald E. Voth &
Richard D. Rodefeld

"A community is said to exist when interaction between individuals has the purpose of meeting individual needs and obtaining group goals . . . a limited geographical area is another feature of community"

Marvin B. Sussman

The community is "a number of families residing in a relatively small area within which they have developed a more or less complete socio-cultural definition . . . by means of which they solve problems arising from the sharing of an area."

Willis A. Sutton &
Jivi Kilaja

Beyond the two necessary ingredients of shared locality and interests, I would suggest two others often implied in the above definitions but seldom insisted upon: 1) people must believe in the community's *reality*—that is, the place must exist not only on official maps but also inside people's heads; and 2) as Voth and Rodefeld imply, the community must have a center, a geographical core where people regularly meet, conduct business and renew social connections.

Later we shall observe how an absence of the first ingredient, belief in the community's reality, can become self-fulfilling, making all but impossible the revival of a village in decline. What is perhaps less widely recognized is the vital connection between village identification and the second ingredient, the presence of a geographical core. The Massachusetts Bay Colony made it unlawful for a citizen to live more than one mile distant from the center of the village—a safeguard against Indian forays, to be sure, but also a recognition of those civic blessings that radiate outward from the center of every community.

As recently as 1970 the sociologists Ruth C. Young and Olaf F. Larson made a similar discovery. In their study of "The Social Ecology of a Rural Community" (*Rural Sociology*, Vol. 35, No. 31), they observed that a resident's degree of identification with community affairs depended to a large extent on "where the individual lives relative to the village center"—the closer in, the more identification. "Interaction," the writers noted, "increases the individual's identification with, and participation in, the community structure."

In their summary Young and Larson went still further, strongly suggesting that lack of a village center could lead to community disintegration.

In many rural areas of the nation, recent decades have witnessed the decline of local neighborhood churches, schools, and clubs and the growth of centralized facilities. As long as such centralized institutions include everyone, they probably help integrate individuals in formerly isolated situations into the larger community and society. But in cases where they leave groups out or fail to attract some individuals, those omitted are all the more isolated from society. And in many areas where the decline of rural institutions has not been accompanied by the growth of a strong centralized community system, problems are intensified.

The pertinence of these findings to small-town post offices seems clear enough. As a "centralized institution" that "includes

everyone," the rural post office frequently helps to reduce isolation and sustain community.

Such connections are far from abstract. When the residents of Lemont, Pennsylvania, opposed a plan to move their post office from the town's center to its outskirts, they called upon a sociologist from Pennsylvania State University to testify on their behalf before the borough zoning commission—and that scholar, Kenneth P. Wilkinson, used the Young and Larson study to demonstrate that village post offices should be centrally located. So strongly did the citizens of Lemont feel about the location of their post office that when push came to shove, more than 300 of them donated \$8,000 for work the contractor had already undertaken on the new, objectionable site; it was the Postal Service's price for calling off the project.

Village centers, of course, are mainly clusters of businesses, and to the extent that a post office in their midst helps support those businesses, it also nourishes life in the community—a point made repeatedly by rural spokespersons during the 1975 Congressional hearings. A few samples:

From Bern, Kansas: "We are alarmed over the possibility of the closing of our post office. We have much activity in our town Among the businesses are the new pet food plant, the Bern meat processing plant, the clinic . . . not to mention the State Bank of Bern, which has depositors from miles around If we will have to give up our local post office and go 12 miles to either Sabetha or Seneca to get our business done, it will be tragic."

Rep. Keith B. Sebelius of Kansas: "When a community loses its post office, it also loses its identity. There is no road back. For business and industry to locate in rural and small-town America, there must be a foundation of basic community services. The community post office is the cornerstone of this foundation."

Rep. Peter A. Peyser of New York: "When people go to the post office, if there . . . are several small stores in the area, they get the benefit of that attraction. You pull them away from there, and I think you could have an impact that is far broader than just the post office."

For our purposes, then, a small community can be defined as follows: A place with generally agreed-upon boundaries, where the inhabitants (a) "know" their community exists, (b) share many social and civic goals, and (c) make regular use of a central area, usually a trade center.

Attitudes

The American public's attitude toward small communities has long been characterized by a strange ambivalence, a mixture of affection and scorn, attraction and repulsion. In the early part of the present century, writers like Sherwood Anderson and Sinclair Lewis made American small towns notorious as mean-spirited islands of provincialism in a sea of civilized urbanism. Later—in the 30s, and again in the 60s and 70s—some writers refurbished the picture, portraying American hamlets as oases of old-fashioned virtue in a desert of industrial venality. While neither of these views is wholly accurate, both do reflect authentic facets of village life; moreover, the wild swings in our literature from cynicism to romanticism tell us much about our own vacillations vis-a-vis community.

America's modern scholars, meanwhile, have seemed more sure of their ground. Most have written off the village as a quaint anachronism at best and a barrier to "progress" at worst. Large and learned tomes have been devoted to demonstrating the inevitable disappearance of rural community life before the onslaught of urban technology and the social institutions it has spawned. Some of these works, like *Communities Left Behind* and *The Concept of Community*, appear tinged with regret; others—e.g., *Small Town in Mass Society*, *The Eclipse of Community*—seem less than sorry. But for better or for worse, they all accept the notion that rural communities are becoming obsolete. (For citations on these and related works, see the Annotated Bibliography.)

Curiously, these social scientists do not stop at depicting metropolitan culture as the wave of the future; they also insist it was the wave of the past. Even so fair-minded a sociologist as Scott Greer has claimed, in *The Concept of Community*, that although "Village communities have formed the economic and demographic base for the majority of the world's population since the Neolithic era, . . . the high points of history have occurred in the city. The 'urbs,' the people of the cities, are the ones who have made history." (What he might have said was: They are the ones who have written history.)

In general, then, most academic observers of the American social scene would probably endorse the saturnine opinions of William Simon and John H. Gagnon, as expressed in their essay on "The Decline and Fall of the Small Town" (*Trans-Action*, Vol. 4, No. 5):

The land and the economy of the United States will not support as many small towns as they did before. It is very difficult not to see the future as a long drawn-out struggle for community survival, lasting for half a century, in which some battles may be won but the war will be lost. A future in which most such

towns will become isolated or decayed, in which the local amenities must deteriorate, and in which there will finally be left only the aged, the inept, the very young—and the local power elite.

Nonetheless, a small number of social scientists and rural advocates have all along espoused a wholly different vision of rural community life, a vision more flattering and less fatalistic. Its flattering side is typified in the works of the late Arthur E. Morgan, who, among other things, was the Tennessee Valley Authority's first chairman and a long-time president of Antioch College. One of Morgan's books, *The Small Community: Foundation of Democratic Life* (Harper & Brothers, 1942), is a 312-page hymn of praise to small-town America. In it Morgan made the familiar argument that the nation relies on small towns as a "seed bed of values." "The roots of civilization," he wrote, "are elemental traits—good will, neighborliness, fair play, courage, tolerance, open-minded inquiry, patience." Moreover, "These finer underlying traits . . . are learned in the intimate, friendly world of the family and the small community."

Morgan was also among the first to seriously challenge metropolitan determinism, which even then was consigning rural villages to the Twentieth Century scrap-heap. He equated that view of the future with social Darwinism, noting testily, "The doctrine of the 'survival of the fittest' means only that what survives is that which is fittest under the particular existing circumstances. In a crude society, fine qualities may be under great handicaps"

Others came after Morgan to carry on the debate, none perhaps so passionately, but several, by force of their marshalled evidence, more persuasively. The anthropologist Walter Goldschmidt brought out *As You Sow* in 1947, his classic study of the effects of agribusiness on rural community life in California. The first sentence in the book told the story: "From industrialized sowing of the soil is reaped an urbanized society." Goldschmidt attempted to show that the presence of agribusiness in the San Joaquin Valley, with its aggregates of machinery and wealth, was antithetical to the social health of nearby villages. "This is a community study," he observed, "but whether it is the study of communities depends upon our definition of that concept. For our data show . . . that the town and its surrounding rural population form a community only in the political sense. The ties which bind the individuals living in this area are subservient to the ties of social classes and cliques which are at all times dominant. It is this fact more than any other which compels us to consider the rural community as urbanized"

Close upon the heels of Goldschmidt's lament came another, this one an investigation into the problems faced by residents of a small town in the Southwest, "Caliente," when their primary employer, a railroad company, switched from steam power to diesel power, thereby throwing a large number of villagers out of work. What is notable in W. F. Cottrell's widely reprinted study, "Death by Dieselization" (*American Sociology Review*, June 1951), is the quietly effective way in which he questions the validity of our old friend, social Darwinism. In response to such frequently repeated notions as "the inevitability of progress" and "the law of supply and demand"—shibboleths commonly used to justify the railroad's virtual abandonment of the town—Cottrell poses a different set of slogans, such as "protection . . . from technological change" and "intervention of the state," ideas he insists are just as "natural," "normal" and "rational" as the first set. Here again, the tenets of economic determinism are asked to yield to "higher," more "human" values, including those of community.

It was anything but coincidental that these village-oriented attacks on fatalism should come during a period of near-catastrophic rural attrition—when, in the name of progress, thousands of small-town institutions were dismantled or allowed to die. The social commentator Max Lerner, writing in *America As A Civilization* (Simon & Schuster, 1957), accurately described the relentless process:

Somewhere between the turn of century and the New Deal the small town felt the withering touch of the Great Artifact that we call American society, and in the quarter century between 1930 and 1955 the decisive turn was made, away from small-town life. The currents of American energy moved around and beyond the small towns, leaving them isolated, demoralized, with their young people leaving them behind like abandoned ghost towns.

Those were the years when rural schools by the thousands were consolidated out of existence, joining rural churches, banks and other local organizations in a parade of extinction. The Federal government contributed to this rout during the 1950s by closing nearly 6,000 small-community post offices, more than a 100 percent increase over the previous decade's total. One could sympathize with Oren Lee Staley, the president of the National Farmers Organization, when he uttered his dark, oft-quoted jeremiad: "The farmhouse lights are going out all over America."

If the long rural night seemed oddly "all-of-a-piece"—complete, ubiquitous and inevitable—the reasons for it seemed remarkably varied. Scott Greer shrewdly touched on some of those in a com-

ment he made, in 1969, on Cottrell's "Dieselization" study. "The Caliente he speaks of," wrote Greer, "may stand for hundreds of other towns, from Jerome, Arizona, which died as its copper deposits reached unprofitable levels for extraction, to Baird, Texas, which died as the improvements in roads and automobiles brought it into competition with the much larger city of Abilene." In truth, though the reasons were many, to Greer they had but a single underlying cause: a changing technology placed at the service of profit.

But as Greer asked, profit for whom? "The slogan 'Progress Requires Sacrifice,' " he commented, "conceals the question: Who will benefit and who will lose? Accepting the *laissez faire* philosophy of social change, one must say that those who control and execute change will win, [and] those who represent the old order lose. Such an outcome, as Cottrell points out, punishes the virtuous and rewards the wicked."

Yet both the new order and the old had more surprises in store. In the 1960s and '70s, Americans began to change their patterns of settlement and mobility, with the upshot that rural community life revived in many places. Some early soundings of those profound transformations were taken in 1971 by Glenn V. Fuguitt, the widely respected demographer, in his study, "The Places Left Behind: Population Trends and Policy for Rural America" (*Rural Sociology*, Vol. 36, No. 4). In the very first paragraph Fuguitt announced the startling news: "There is evidence of an emerging decentralization trend around larger nonmetropolitan center." And; having documented the trend, he came to an interesting conclusion:

As one who has studied small towns and villages for a number of years, I am struck by the fact that they prevail despite most people's efforts to write them off. They may not perform the same functions as previously; they may in fact serve little more than population nodes; they may even lose considerable population; but somehow they stay in there for census after census. This was poignantly expressed by the headline of a recent newspaper: "Small Town Dies, but Life Goes On"

As we saw in an earlier section, the emerging trend that Fuguitt spotted in 1971 was confirmed in subsequent years, with three-fourths of all non-metropolitan communities registering population gains between 1970-75; and, as Morrison and Wheeler observed, even the most remote rural areas—"the kinds of places that used to be regarded as 'nowhere' "—showed net migration gains.

With the new demography has come new hope among small-community advocates. A revisionism has set in—a reaction to what one rural commentator has called "all the dangerous '-ations' ": dieselization, consolidation, regionalization, and the like.

ERIC/CRESS, a data collection center, now lists 38 studies and articles on "Rural School Consolidation," nearly all hostile to the idea and none published prior to 1972. See, for example, Jonathan Sher's impressive work, *Education in Rural America: A Reassessment of Conventional Wisdom* (Westview Press, 1977), in which he declares, "The fact remains that rural schools are different. And . . . these differences tend to spring from two sources: first, the close relationship between rural communities and their schools; and second, the size of rural schools and school districts The primary attribute of rural education is its small-scale nature."

It is therefore not surprising that the village visitor today sometimes senses a quickening of community spirit and a renewed determination, in Fuguitt's words, to "stay in there for census after census." We turn now to some of those villages, and to their opposite number—the communities left behind.

Villages: Lost and Found

Let us begin with a rural rule-of-thumb: Where one finds community, one also finds a post office; but where one finds a post office, one does not always find community. In my sampling of villages I discovered several extant post offices that appeared to have outlived the communities they had once served. The people who still used those post offices did so for the sake of convenience, or from habit, but rarely from a need to participate in the daily life of their community. Indeed, they frequently identified with a *different* community, one whose name, history and location bore no resemblance to those associated with the local post office.

The Mason post office (a fictitious name), tucked away in the hills of Virginia, offers a fair example of an institution left high and dry by a receding community. Named for a fallen Confederate officer, it was established to serve the new settlers—farmers, mostly—drifting westward up Branch River Hollow. It became the center of tiny new village. Even today the red-white-and-blue post office, which also does duty as a general store, boasts all the artifacts of local pride and sociability: a flagpole with a high-flying flag in the front yard; a congenial-looking porch; and inside, 28 P.O. boxes (all rented) and a pot-belly stove flanked by oaken rockers. But the trappings obscure the sad truth, which is that Mason does not exist. When asked where they lived, all the post office patrons I met answered with names other than Mason. They named Blackville, a larger town six miles down the road, or West Branch Creek, or "near Perry's Bridge." No one prints "Mason" on his letterhead.

I don't mean to belabor this place, but its inadequacies seem worth pursuing, because they can tell us much about the differences between strong and weak communities. Mason is unincorporated, of course, so it has no government. But that deficiency of itself need not be decisive; I found many genuine communities that happened to be unincorporated. More significant is the fact that Mason has no boundaries, no shared geography that people there agree upon; no one knows where Mason begins or ends. To compound the problem, the place lacks a history: its past has been committed neither to paper nor to memory, so that it exists only in the present, and barely that. Finally, Mason seems bereft of most of the institutions and organizations that commonly support a community: banks, stores, schools, churches, scout troops, garden clubs, athletic groups, and the like. There remains only the post office-general store, and one much like it can be found just four miles up the road. It wasn't any wonder that the Mason Postmaster could tell me, "If we vanish, no one will miss us." I have no way of knowing how many "Masons" there are in the country, but they can doubtless be found in every state. These non-communities should cause no difficulty to the Postal Service in its efforts to apply the Effect-on-Community rule.

It should also be noted that in my travels I came upon five villages whose post offices had already been shut down, and in none of those places was I able to discern the existence of a viable community. It was possible in such cases, of course, to have confused cause with effect; but since in every instance no more than seven years had elapsed between the closings and my visits, I could have reasonably expected to find the *remnants* of communities, had any recently existed. I found none. Typical of what I did find was West Gouldsboro, Maine, where the post office was abandoned in 1972. The town is on the map but not in our world. It is a bend in the highway, fronted on one side by a few homes and on the other by a pottery barn that once housed the post office. The retired postmaster of West Gouldsboro, Chandler Noyes, assured me there hadn't been any real community there in at least a generation—no businesses, no voluntary organizations, no government. A few citizens, Noyes conceded, still identified with the "West Gouldsboro" name, but that was all. It is hard to fault the Postal Service for having closed the West Gouldsboro office, particularly when one realizes there are five other post offices in the vicinity, two less than six miles from West Gouldsboro.

On the other hand, I found many remarkably strong communities—villages that have suffered some over the years from "all the -ations," but which nevertheless continue to maintain trade centers and a common sense of purpose. One of these was Colo,

Iowa, a village of about 600 citizens, located twelve miles from Ames, along the old Lincoln Highway.

Like so many small towns in America, Colo has lost its share of institutions and services. Once it had physicians, dentists, and veterinarians; now it has none. Once it had railroad passenger service; now it does not. Once it had a weekly newspaper; now the presses are stilled. Yet Colo has managed to hold on to many vital institutions, and in some cases to expand and improve them. For instance:

The School: Despite pressures from outside, the Colo school system has not been consolidated and remains largely intact. The enrollment, kindergarten through grade 8, is 320. Colo residents are very proud of their school—"We keep the kids in town," a citizen told me—and they have readily endorsed school bond issues whenever called upon, most recently in 1975. Each month the school sends a newsletter to every resident—a bulk mailing completed by the local post office.

The Government: Colo is an incorporated village with a mayor and a council. Its government is housed in a civic center on Main Street, built in 1975. The building also houses the volunteer fire department and a new town library. Senior citizens dine there three times a week and also go there in the afternoons for card-playing and socializing. In addition to these facilities, the town maintains its own water and sewer systems.

The Businesses: Resident stockholders still control the Colo Telephone Company, incorporated in 1906; the last "crank and yell" phone went out in 1958. Other local businesses include three grain elevators, a flower shop and a cafe. A local bank, called the Farmers Savings Bank of Colo, went into receivership in 1976, but has since made a comeback under new auspices. The bank is next door to the post office.

Of all the local businesses, town residents are proudest of their general store, a privately-owned enterprise that the citizens financed. Two years ago the old general store burned to the ground, and it appeared that the owner would be unable to build a new one. So, as Mayor Carmody tells it, "We held a big meeting and decided that people should build the store and then get somebody to run it." They sold shares to each other for \$100 apiece, collecting \$48,000 in two weeks. As a result, Colo again has a general store, which along with the bank and the post office constitutes the town's vital center.

The Organizations: Colo has an active Civic Betterment Society. It also has three churches and many voluntary organizations, including the Lions, the Jaycees, a Young Women's Club, a Good Earth Garden Club, and an American Legion post. A listing in a

1976 booklet, "History of Colo," names 32 voluntary organizations then extant.

The History: All towns have a past, but only some have a history, i.e., an awareness of their past. Colo celebrated its Centennial in 1976, marking the occasion with an outdoor festival and publication of its "History of Colo," a bound, mimeographed opus of some 100 pages. (Among much else, the book contains an account, possibly apocryphal, of how the town got its name: "Carlo, a small black dog, was killed by a train. His young mistress, not being able to speak plainly at her young age, went about calling, 'Colo, where is Colo?' ") The town fathers also had Colo Centennial coins struck in honor of the occasion. In general, I found that the citizenry enjoyed a lively sense of their community's past, a circumstance that usually means the community has a future.

To repeat, the Colo story is not exceptional: I visited many such villages possessing many such assets. And no more than the Masons and West Gouldsboros of the nation—places that still dot the maps but no longer dent the social landscape—should the Colos of America pose a problem to the Postal Service. For they are lively, authentic communities whose futures would clearly be jeopardized by shutdowns of their post offices.

Yet many villages in America are neither Masons nor Colos. Their community moods and metabolisms, their capacities for common endeavor, fall somewhere between the two poles. In my judgment, the signs to look for when appraising such places, where the reviews are mixed, are those that point to community struggle. By way of illustration, consider the case of David, Kentucky, a once-abandoned coal mining village in the black hills south of Prestonsburg. Until recently it was in a state of near-total decay, many of its houses forsaken and rotted out, most of its institutions long since vanished. But a few years ago the site was reinhabited by some younger people who decided to form a non-profit organization and start to rebuild. Today David has a population of 38 families—including some oldtimers—and a few elementary institutions, notably a small store (the Mini-Mart), an arts-and-crafts enterprise and a monthly mimeographed newspaper called "The David Voice."

David has always had a post office, even in its pre-revival days, and some of the older residents claim it was the presence of that post office that kept the community alive; it reminded people there was still a "David." In any case, the post office now looms as David's major institution and it is probably no accident that the community's only tangible prize, a golden athletic trophy, is conspicuously displayed in the post office lobby.

Some new housing is going up in David now and some of the old houses are being repaired. The population grows a little each year. It may be too soon to predict the outcome of all this, but it seems safe to say that the residents of David consider themselves a community, albeit a fragile one, and that the chief element in their identity with David is struggle. They are struggling to become a reality — a sufficient reason, in my view, to keep their post office going.

I found other villages whose status seemed still more ambiguous — hamlets with populations hovering around one hundred and boasting only a store, a post office and perhaps a tavern or luncheonette. But I learned that among such places community feelings and energies could vary sharply: some looked outward while others looked inward; some grew while others declined; and some inspired strong local loyalties while others appeared to generate little pride of place. To such disparate villages — in weighing the Effect-on-Community rule — I would apply the lessons of David, Colo and Mason, as well as the lessons learned in Section II of this Issue Paper. It is beyond the scope of our purpose (and the skills of the author) to develop a quantitative scale that measures the relative strengths and weaknesses of rural communities; but it may be appropriate to end this essay by suggesting some “vital signs” that the Postal Service can later use in making its judgments. The signs, to be presented here in the form of 21 questions and roughly in order of priority, are meant as clues to two types of vitality: 1) the viability of any community in question, and 2) the vigor of that community’s relationship with its post office.

Vital Signs

1. Does the village have a geographic center, and is the post office in it? Do people live within walking distance of the center?

2. Do residents regularly gather at the post office, not only to pick up their mail but also to renew social ties and exchange local news?

3. Are any of the following groups — the elderly, the poor, the uneducated — disproportionately represented in the village population, and does the post office serve the members of such groups in socially significant ways?

4. Could the same be said of minority-group members who reside or work in the village? Would the quality of their lives be diminished for want of a local post office?

5. Is the community working (or struggling) to survive and/or grow? Are residents conscious of a continuing civic challenge?

6. Do most residents agree they inhabit essentially the same place within the same boundaries? Do people know when they are in the village and when they are not?

7. Do the inhabitants identify with the village by name? When asked where they live, do most respond with a single village name, and does the post office bear that same name?

8. Are there small businesses in town, such as a store, a beauty shop, a diner? Are they located near the post office? Are they helped commercially by traffic the post office generates?

9. Are there larger businesses in town, such as a bank, a creamery, a grain elevator? Are these helped commercially by the availability of local mail service?

10. Have additional businesses been started in recent years? Have any older businesses expanded?

11. Do citizens ever unite in order to solve a civic problem, such as organizing a fire department or building a new general store?

12. Do they ever unite in order to combat external pressures — for instance, to preserve their post office or to save their school?

13. Is the village served by any official or quasi-official organization — a town council, for instance, or a civic improvement association? Are these groups active?

14. Are there other, public institutions or services designed for village residents? A school? A library? A park?

15. Have any new houses or other structures been built recently? Any additions or major repairs?

16. Are there voluntary organizations based in the village? Churches? Veterans' groups? Women's clubs?

17. Do residents generally know something about the history of their community? Has it been written down anywhere?

18. Are special "days" or festivals observed village-wide — anniversaries, harvests, the Fourth of July?

19. Does the village have amateur athletic teams — softball, soccer, etc. — that regularly play other villages? Are their fortunes closely attended? And are trophies deposited in a central location, where everyone can see them?

20. Is the village population disproportionately illiterate? Do local post office workers go out of their way to meet their special needs?

21. In a poor community, does the post office appreciably aid the local economy through the jobs it provides, the rent it pays, the supplies it purchases and the contracts it lets?

TABLE 1. Summary of General Characteristics: 1970

Size of Place	Number (in millions)	Percentage Change 1960-1970	Percent of Population			
			Blacks and Others	Under 18 years of age	18-64 years of age	65 years of age and over
Total	203.2	13.3	12.5	34.3	55.9	9.9
Urban	149.3	19.9	13.8	33.3	56.9	9.8
Urbanized areas	118.4	24.6	14.8	33.5	57.2	9.4
Central cities	83.9	11.7	22.5	31.8	57.5	10.7
Urban fringe	54.5	44.0	5.7	35.4	56.7	7.8
Other urban	30.9	5.0	9.9	32.9	55.7	11.4
Population of 10,000 or more	18.6	2.8	10.7	32.3	57.0	10.8
2,500-10,000 population	14.3	7.6	9.0	33.6	54.2	12.2
Rural	53.9	-0.3	9.1	36.8	53.1	10.1
1,000-2,500 population	8.7	2.5	7.8	33.9	52.6	13.6
Other rural	47.2	-0.7	9.3	37.2	53.3	9.6

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census. Characteristics of the Population Part I. 1970. General Population Characteristics. Table 47, p. 1-281.

TABLE 2. Population of the United States: 1790-1970

Year	Total		Urban		Rural	
	Population (in millions)	Percent change from previous census	Percent of total Population	Percent change from previous census	Percent of total Population	Percent change from previous census
Current definition¹						
1970	203.2	13.3	73.5	19.2	26.5	-0.3
1960	179.3	18.5	69.9	29.3	30.1	-0.6
1950	151.3	—	64.0	—	36.0	—
Previous definition						
1960	179.3	18.5	63.0	25.4	37.0	8.3
1950	151.3	14.5	59.6	20.6	40.4	6.5
1940	132.2	7.3	56.5	8.0	43.5	6.3
1930	122.2	16.2	56.1	27.5	43.9	4.4
1920	108.0	15.0	51.2	29.0	48.8	3.2
1910	92.2	21.0	45.6	39.2	54.4	9.1
1900	78.2	21.0	39.6	36.7	60.4	12.5
1890	63.0	25.5	35.1	56.5	64.9	13.4
1880	50.2	30.2	28.2	42.7	71.8	25.8
1870	38.5	22.6	25.7	59.3	74.3	13.6
1860	31.4	35.6	19.8	75.4	80.2	26.4
1850	23.2	35.9	15.3	92.1	84.7	29.1
1840	17.1	32.7	10.8	63.7	89.2	29.7
1830	12.9	33.5	8.8	62.6	91.2	31.2
1820	9.6	33.1	7.2	31.9	92.8	33.2
1810	7.2	36.4	7.3	63.0	92.7	34.7
1800	5.3	35.1	6.1	59.9	93.9	33.8
1790	3.9	—	5.1	—	94.9	—

¹According to the current definition "the urban population comprises all persons living in urbanized areas and in places of 2,500 inhabitants or more outside urban areas. The population not classified as urban constitute the rural population." (p. xvii-xix). The major difference from previous census tract definitions lies in the classification of urban towns and townships in the North Eastern (e.g. New England, Pennsylvania) tract of the country.

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census. Characteristics of the Population Part I, 1970. Number of Inhabitants. Table 3, p. 1-42.

TABLE 3. Number of Rural Places and Percent of the U.S. Population Residing Therein: 1950-1970

Size of Place	Number of Places			Percent of U.S. Population		
	1950	1960	1970	1950	1960	1970
Total.....	13,851	13,749	13,706	35.0	30.1	26.5
Places of 1,000-2,500.....	4,186	4,151	4,191	4.3	3.6	3.3
Places under 1,000.....	9,665	9,598	9,515	2.7	2.2	1.9*
Other rural ¹	(X)	(X)	(X)	29.0	24.3	21.3

¹Other rural refers to 'open country residences'.

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the U.S. 1977 (96th ed.) p. 18. Washington D.C. 1977

**TABLE 4. Components of Population Change
for Groups of Metropolitan and Nonmetropolitan Counties: 1960-70 and 1970-1974**

County category	1974 Population (000's)	Percentage Annual population growth rate		Percentage Annual natural increase rate		Percentage Annual net migration rate	
		1960-70	1970-74	1960-70	1970-74	1960-70	1970-74
Total U.S.	211,390	1.3	0.9	1.1	0.7	0.2	0.2
Inside SMSAs ¹ (Metropolitan)	154,934	1.6	0.8	1.2	0.7	0.5	0.1
Outside SMSAs (Nonmetropolitan)	56,457	0.4	1.3	0.9	0.6	-0.5	0.7
Nonmetropolitan counties from which:							
≥ 20% commute to SMSAs	4,372	0.9	2.0	0.8	0.5	-0.1	1.5
10%-19% commute to SMSAs	9,912	0.7	1.4	0.8	0.5	-0.1	0.8
3%-9% commute to SMSAs	14,263	0.5	1.3	0.9	0.6	-0.4	0.7
< 3% commute to SMSAs	27,909	0.2	1.1	0.9	0.6	-0.5	0.5
Entirely rural ² counties not adjacent to an SMSA	4,616	-0.4	1.4	0.8	0.4	-1.2	1.0

¹Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas as currently defined.

²"Entirely rural" means the counties contain no town of 2,500 or more inhabitants.

Source: "Rural Renaissance in America?", *Population Bulletin*, No. 31, No. 3, (Population Reference Bureau, Inc., Washington D.C.) Table 3, p. 12-13.

**TABLE 5. Mobility of the U.S. Population:
1965-70 and 1970-75**

Population category	Percent of population	
	1965-70	1970-75
Non-movers (lived in same house)	53.0	51.5
Movers (lived in different U.S. house)	40.3	41.3
Within same SMSA	18.7	19.0
Between SMSAs	6.2	6.3
From SMSAs to nonmetropolitan areas	2.9	3.5
From nonmetropolitan areas to SMSAs	3.1	2.6
Outside SMSAs at both dates	9.4	1.9
Movers from abroad	1.5	5.4
No report on mobility status	5.2	
	100.0	100.0

Source: "Rural Renaissance in America?", *Population Bulletin*, No. 31, No. 3, (Population Reference Bureau, Inc., Washington D.C.) Table 1, p. 8.

**TABLE 6. Rural Population
by Race: 1970**

	Rural Nonfarm	Rural Farm
All races (Percent)	85.0	15.0
(Percent of U.S.)	(22.0)	(4.1)
Whites (Percent)	90.5	93.8
(Percent of race)	(23.2)	(4.4)
Blacks/Others (Percent)	9.5	6.2
(Percent of races)	(17.0)	(2.0)

Source: *Historical Statistics, Colonial Times to 1970. "Population by Type of Residence, Sex, and Race."* Table A78-81. U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1976. U.S. Government Printing Office: Washington, D.C.

**TABLE 7. Age Distribution
by Place of Residence: 1970
[In percent]**

Age	U.S. Total	Urban	Rural Nonfarm	Rural Farm
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Under 5 years	8.4	8.3	9.0	6.3
5-9	9.9	9.6	10.8	9.5
10-14	10.2	9.9	11.1	11.9
15-19	9.4	9.4	9.3	10.8
20-24	7.9	8.5	8.7	4.3
25-29	6.8	6.8	6.5	3.9
30-34	5.6	5.6	5.9	4.3
35-39	5.5	5.5	5.6	5.2
40-44	5.9	5.9	5.6	6.1
45-49	5.9	6.0	5.5	6.8
50-54	5.4	5.5	5.0	7.1
55-59	4.9	4.9	4.7	6.9
60-64	4.2	4.2	4.2	5.9
65-69	3.4	3.4	3.5	4.3
70-74	2.7	2.7	2.7	3.0
75 and over	3.8	3.8	3.8	3.8
Under 18	34.4	33.5	37.3	35.5
21 and over	60.3	60.9	58.3	60.5
65 and over	9.9	9.8	9.9	10.8
Median age	28.1	28.1	27.3	33.7

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census. Characteristics of the Population Part I, 1970. General Social and Economic Characteristics, Table 85, p. 1-380-361.

**TABLE 8. Educational Characteristics
by Place of Residence: 1970**

Percent by Level of School Completed (Persons 25 years and older)	Place of Residence			
	U.S.	Urban	Rural Nonfarm	Rural Farm
Less than 5 years of school ¹	5.5	5.0	7.2	5.7
Less than 1 year of high school	28.3	25.8	35.2	38.8
4 years high school or more	52.3	55.2	44.8	42.8
4 years of college or more	10.7	12.1	7.1	4.5
Median school years completed	12.1	12.2	11.2	10.8

¹Functional illiteracy is defined by the federal government as five or fewer years of school. ("Rural America Fact Sheet - Education," p. 2. *Rural America*, Washington D.C.)

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Characteristics of the Population Part I, 1970. General and Social Economic Characteristics, Table 88, pp. 1-386 - 387.

**TABLE 9. Income in 1969 of Families
by Place of Residence
(In percent)**

Total	U.S.	Urban	Rural Nonfarm	Rural Farm
Less than \$1,000	2.5	2.2	3.0	4.7
\$1,000 - 1,999	3.4	2.7	5.1	6.2
\$2,000 - 2,999	4.4	3.8	5.8	7.6
\$3,000 - 3,999	4.9	4.3	6.1	7.9
\$4,000 - 4,999	5.1	4.6	6.1	7.5
\$5,000 - 5,999	5.7	5.2	6.9	8.2
\$6,000 - 6,999	6.1	5.7	7.3	7.3
\$7,000 - 7,999	6.7	6.4	7.7	6.8
\$8,000 - 8,999	7.1	6.9	7.8	6.5
\$9,000 - 9,999	6.7	6.7	7.0	5.4
\$10,000 - 11,999	12.9	13.2	12.3	9.7
\$12,000 - 14,999	13.7	14.8	11.4	8.6
\$15,000 - 24,999	16.0	18.0	10.6	10.0
\$25,000 - 49,999	3.8	4.4	2.2	3.0
\$50,000 and over	.007	.009	.003	.004
Median income	\$9,950	\$10,196	\$8,231	\$7,082

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Characteristics of the Population Part I 1970. General Social and Economic Characteristics, Table 94, pp. 1-398 - 399.

**TABLE 10. Poverty Status in 1969 of Families
by Place of Residence**

Incomes less than Poverty Level	Place of Residence			
	U.S.	Urban	Rural Nonfarm	Rural Farm
Families (in millions)	5.5	3.4	1.7	0.4
Percent of all families	10.7	9.0	15.1	16.4
Mean family income	\$1935	\$1936	\$2035	\$1539
Mean income deficit	\$1542	\$1578	\$1519	\$1388
Percent receiving public assistance	21.5	24.0	19.2	7.8
Mean size of family	3.9	3.8	4.0	4.0
Percent number of children under 18 years of age	3.0	2.9	3.2	3.2

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Characteristics of the Population Part I, 1970, General Social and Economic Characteristics, Table 95, pp. 1-400 - 401.

**TABLE 11. Number of Post Offices
and Difference From Previous Year: 1895-1975**

Year	Number of Post Offices	Difference from Previous Year	Year	Number of Post Offices	Difference from Previous Year
1895	70,064		1936	45,233	-454
1896	70,360	+ 296	1937	44,877	-356
1897	71,022	+ 662	1938	44,667	-210
1898	73,570	+ 2,548	1939	44,400	-267
1899	75,000	+ 1,430	1940	44,086	-305
1900	76,688	+ 1,688	1941	43,806	-289
1901	76,945	+ 257	1942	43,406	-400
1902	75,824	- 1,021	1943	42,680	-726
1903	74,169	- 1,755	1944	42,216	-464
1904	71,131	-3,038	1945	41,792	-424
1905	68,131	-3,000	1946	41,751	-41
1906	65,600	-2,531	1947	41,759	+ 8
1907	62,859	-2,741	1948	41,695	-64
1908	60,704	-1,955	1949	41,607	-88
1909	60,144	-560	1950	41,484	-143
1910	59,580	-564	1951	41,193	-271
1911	59,237	-343	1952	40,919	-274
1912	58,729	-508	1953	40,609	-310
1913	58,020	-709	1954	39,405	-1,204
1914	56,810	-1,210	1955	38,316	-1,089
1915	56,380	-430	1956	37,515	-801
1916	55,934	-446	1957	37,012	-503
1917	55,413	-521	1958	36,308	-704
1918	54,345	-1,068	1959	35,750	-558
1919	53,084	-1,261	1960	35,238	-512
1920	52,638	-446	1961	34,956	-283
1921	52,168	-470	1962	34,797	-158
1922	51,947	-221	1963	34,498	-299
1923	51,613	-334	1964	34,040	-458
1924	51,266	-347	1965	33,624	-416
1925	50,957	-309	1966	33,121	-503
1926	50,601	-356	1967	32,626	-495
1927	50,266	-335	1968	32,262	-664
1928	49,944	-322	1969	32,064	-198
1929	49,482	-462	1970	32,002	-62
1930	49,063	-419	1971	31,847	-55
1931	48,733	-330	1972	31,686	-261
1932	48,159	-574	1973	31,385	-301
1933	47,642	-517	1974	31,009	-385
1934	46,507	-1,135	1975	30,754	-246
1935	45,687	-820			

Source: "GAO's Recommendation that 12,000 Small Post Offices be Closed," 1975 Joint Hearings, p. 116.

A Selected Annotated Bibliography

About the Post Office

Comptroller General of the United States. "Report to the Congress: \$100 Million Could Be Saved Annually in Postal Operations in Rural America Without Affecting the Quality of Service." Washington, D.C.: U.S. General Accounting Office, 1975. A 20-page discourse on fiscal benefits that might accrue to Postal Service if it shut down most of its small post offices. For rural reaction, see "Subcommittee" listing below.

Cullinan, Gerald. *The United States Postal Service*. New York: Praeger Library of U.S. Government Departments and Agencies, 1973. This is a comprehensive discussion of the growth and history of the U.S. Post Office since Colonial days. The author addresses the politics of postal development and presents judicious profiles of noteworthy postmasters general. Of special interest is his discussion of the Rural Free Delivery system.

*Fuller, Wayne E. *The American Mail: Enlarger of the Common Life*. University of Chicago Press, 1972. A most helpful history, documenting the politics of postal development as an arena, from one generation to the next, for urban-rural conflict. Fuller is particularly enlightening on Congress' many attempts to resolve contradictions between two nagging political necessities: the one for fiscal prudence, the other for postal expansion.

Fuller, Wayne E. *RFD: The Changing Face of Rural America*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964. In this ample political history, Fuller suggests that the triumph of Rural Free Delivery was a mixed blessing for rural Americans, providing needed service to citizens living in remote area, but also rendering thousands of village post offices obsolete.

Kappel, Frederick R., et al. *Kappel Commission Report: Towards Postal Excellence*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, June 1968. One of a series of reports prepared by the President's Commission on Postal Organization, this volume calls for a reorganization of the Post Office along corporate-managerial lines. Most of its major recommendations—including an eventual end to deficit spending—were incorporated by Congress in the 1970 Postal Reorganization Act.

Leech, D.D.T. *The Post Office Department of the United States of America*. New York: Arno Press, 1976 (originally published by Judd & Detweiler, 1879). Leech, a retired Post Office Department official, gives us a blow-by-blow narrative of the department's evolution, from George Washington's administration through that of Rutherford B. Hayes. Some useful tables in the back document the Post Office's remarkably swift expansion during the first half of Nineteenth Century.

Subcommittees on Postal Service and Postal Facilities, Mail and Labor Management. "GAO's Recommendation that 12,000 Small Post Offices Be Closed."

*Especially recommended.

Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, Serial No. 94-45 (Joint Hearings, September 23, 24 & October 8, 1975) and Subcommittee on Postal Facilities, Mail, and Labor Management. "New Criteria for Small Post Office Closings and New Regulations to Control Personnel Costs." Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, Serial No. 94-60 (Hearings, December 3 & 5, 1975). Held in reaction to the Postal Service's expressed desire to close more small post offices, these hearings were mainly occasions for protests by rural advocates. Useful texts for anyone seeking to understand rural sentiments towards small post offices.

About Rural America

Barnes, Peter, ed. *The People's Land*. Emmaus, Pa.: Rodale Press, 1975. Subtitled "A Reader on Land Reform in the United States," this anthology relies on a liberal perspective to interpret rural decline. Victor K. Ray's essay on rural community eclipse—"They're Destroying Our Small Towns"—is particularly helpful.

Biggar, Jeanne C. "The Sunning of America: Migration to the Sunbelt." Washington, D.C.: *Population Bulletin*, Vol. 34, No. 1, 1979 (Population Reference Bureau). Biggar summarizes recent migration trends that have favored the South and Southwest. Sections of the essay focus on elderly migrations, urban-to-rural migrations and migration movements throughout U.S. history.

Coppedge, Robert O. and Davis, Carlton G., eds. *Rural Poverty and the Policy Crisis*. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1977. The causes of rural poverty are probed here from several perspectives, including the economic and the sociological. For a good summation of empirical work already done on rural poverty, see chapter by Davis, Schultz, Tweeten and Walker.

Ford, Thomas R., ed. *Rural U.S.A. Persistence and Change*. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1978. A fair-minded overview of contemporary rural society. Major topics include: rural-urban conflicts; in-migration; social change in rural communities; and rural America's future. An extensive reference section for further readings is also included.

Fuguitt, Glenn V. "The City and the Countryside," *Rural Sociology*, Vol. 28, (1963), pp. 246-61. Beginning with an historical review, the noted rural demographer provides an informative discussion of the interdependence between rural and urban components in American society.

Harris, Charles S., Project Director. *Fact Book on Aging: A Profile of America's Older Population*. Washington, D.C. National Council on the Aging, Inc., 1979. Up-to-date figures on America's elderly population, both urban and rural. Good source book.

*Hassinger, Edward W. *The Rural Component of American Society*. Danville, Ill.: Interstate Printers and Publishers, 1978. A broad, up-to-date survey of rural American life, this work is recommended as core reading for anyone being introduced to rural policy issues.

*Especially recommended.

Hathaway, Dale E., et al. *People of Rural America: A 1960 Census Monograph*.

Washington, D.C.: U.S. Bureau of Census (Government Printing Office, 1968). The monograph focuses on social and economic characteristics of the rural population, and attempts to evaluate current definitions of "rural" used by the U.S. Census Bureau. The book is particularly valuable as a translation in narrative form of dense statistical material, providing a framework for updated comparisons.

*Morrison, Peter A., and Wheeler, Judith P. "Rural Renaissance in America? The Revival of Population Growth in Remote Areas." Washington, D.C.: *Population Bulletin*, Vol. 31, No. 3, 1976 (Population Reference Bureau). The authors present a demographic portrait of recent reversal in migration patterns that have resulted in unprecedented rural growth. Clearest summary of demographic trends currently available.

*President's National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty. *The People Left Behind*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1967. Though out-dated in some respects, this thorough explication of poverty in rural America remains the best in the field, both for the data it presents and the compassion it displays.

*Rodefeld, Richard D., et al. *Change in Rural America: Causes, Consequences, and Alternatives*. St. Louis: C.V. Mosby, 1978. This is a large, basic text on rural America, with notable chapters on history, community, economics and social character.

"Rural Fact Sheet #2: Education" and "Rural Fact Sheet #5: The Elderly." Washington, D.C.: Rural America, Inc., 1979. Summaries of data drawn from Census and other sources show that rural America's population is disproportionately aged and under-educated, and that Federal funds have been inadequate to meet those special rural needs.

"Rural School Consolidation." Albuquerque: ERIC/CRESS Search, 1979. A useful annotated bibliography of 38 recent studies and articles on rural school consolidation. Most of the works listed are hostile to consolidation trends.

*Sher, Jonathan P. *Education in Rural America: A Reassessment of Conventional Wisdom*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1977. After nearly a century of relentless school consolidating in rural areas, promoted by educators and politicians alike, Sher comes along to question the policy's wisdom, suggesting that consolidations may be a cause, rather than an effect, of rural decline.

About Community

Baskin, John. *New Burlington: The Life and Death of an American Village*. New York: Norton, 1976. The Ohio village was finally abandoned to make way for a government-sponsored reservoir—but not before Baskin had interviewed all the residents and given us a superb evocation of village life, including its day-to-day social occurrences.

*Especially recommended.

- *Bell, Colin and Newby, Howard. *Community Studies: An Introduction to the Sociology of the Local Community*. New York: Praeger, 1973. An excellent overview of community definitions and theories, from the ideas of Ferdinand Tönnies (the inventor of "Gemeinschaft" and "Gesellschaft") to those of modern-day sociologists. The authors provide an in-depth analysis of community study methodology, as well as an examination of major substantive issues in the field; notably stratification, power and conflict.
- Collins, Alice H. and Pancost, Diane L. *Natural Helping Networks: A Strategy for Prevention*. Washington, D.C.: National Association of Social Workers, 1976. The authors argue for the efficacy of "natural" or informal helping systems that operate *within* communities, as opposed to professional and bureaucratized systems that often seem imposed *on* communities. See especially the section on rural Kansas for insights into how village residents routinely and unobtrusively provide each other with "social services."
- *Cottrell, W.F. "Death by Dieselization." *American Sociology Review*, Vol. 16 (1951), pp. 358-65. Cottrell's classic study of "Caliente," a railroad town, describes the social and economic disaster that occurred when the railroad changed from steam power to diesel power. Study raises some crucial questions, e.g.: Can small towns survive in a society powered by industrial "progress"? And who benefits from the spread of technology?
- Fuguitt, Glenn V. "The Places Left Behind: Population Trends and Policy for Rural America." *Rural Sociology*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (1971), pp. 449-70. This is an early exploration of the migration reversal that was then emerging. Among other things, Fuguitt discovers that many rural communities have been enjoying an unprecedented growth, and that many others—despite attrition—have managed to "stay in there for census after census."
- Goldschmidt, Walter. *As You Sow: Three Studies in the Social Consequences of Agribusiness*. Montclair, N.J.: Allanheld, Osmun (originally published by Free Press, 1947). Goldschmidt, an anthropologist, links the decline of two rural California communities to the concomitant rise of agribusiness. At the same time he demonstrates that a third community—one surrounded by small farms rather than by large, absentee-owned orchards—remains intact. Like Cottrell's "Dieselization" study, this work is implicitly hostile to technological determinism.
- *Greer, Scott and Minar, David. *The Concept of Community*. Chicago: Aldine, 1969. An imaginative anthology that combines the works of novelists and commentators with those of social scientists. This is a fine introduction to both the history and mystery of community, from Athens to "Caliente."
- Morgan, Arthur E. *The Small Community: Foundation of Democratic Life*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1942. Morgan argues that small towns are a "seedbed of values," supplying the nation with most of the basic virtues we try to live by, e.g. honesty, courage and freedom. A good example of pro-rural sentiment, striking many of the same notes we hear today.

*Especially recommended.

Nesbit, Robert A. *The Quest for Community*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1953. This is a protracted and brilliant essay on the virtues of pluralism and decentralized power. Nesbit comes close to writing off the village as too weak an institution to resist the forces of bureaucracy in government and industry; yet he observes that the individual's "quest for community" is a distinguishing feature of the modern era.

North Central Regional Center for Rural Development. *Communities Left Behind: Alternatives for Development*. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1974. A collection of papers presented at a conference held in 1973 at North Dakota State University, this book is mainly a fatalistic lament over dead or dying communities. For two exceptions, see Kenneth P. Wilkinson's chapter on "Consequences of Decline" and Jan L. Flora's on "Research on Declining Communities."

Simon, William and Gagnon, John H. "The Decline and Fall of the Small Town." *Transaction*, Vol. 4, No. 5 (1967), pp. 42-54. The authors study three small towns in Illinois to learn why some communities die while others survive. The two declining towns, they conclude, are led by narrow, selfish cliques; the thriving town, meanwhile, is guided by a relatively broad and altruistic group of citizens. However, Simon and Gagnon do not address the question of whether they have discovered a cause of community decline or merely an effect.

Smith, Suzanne M. *An Annotated Bibliography of Small Town Research*. Madison: University of Wisconsin, Department of Rural Sociology, 1970. A listing of several hundred rural readings, focusing on such topics as population growth and decline, public policy, villages and trade centers, and relations between rural and urban societies.

Vidich, Arthur J. and Bensman, Joseph. *Small Town in Mass Society: Class, Power, and Religion in a Rural Community*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1958. A recurring theme in this oft-cited work is the inability of rural villages to resist urban cultural inroads. The authors seem to be saying that mass society must inevitably swallow the small town. This is a good sample of the dominant view among modern social scientists.

Warren, Roland L. *The Community in Action*. Chicago: Rand McNally, 1978 (3rd edition). Warren rejects most extant theories of community—particularly of rural communities—on the grounds that they overlook radical changes wrought by technology, urbanization and the growth of national government. His own model postulates "strong ties extending far beyond the confines of the community," yet insists upon a common locality.

*Young, Ruth C. and Larson, Olaf F. "The Social Ecology of a Rural Community." *Rural Sociology*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (1970), pp. 337-53. This study suggests that village centers are more than commercial clusters. Young and Larson find a correlation between a citizen's residential location and his or her participation in community affairs—the closer one lives to the center, the more one participates. The study is often used by rural advocates to demonstrate the social assets inherent in village post offices, general stores and other centrally located institutions.

*Especially recommended.